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Citation for published version:

Cairns, JW 2016, *Plessy v Ferguson*.. <<http://www.elhblog.law.ed.ac.uk/2016/11/03/plessy-v-ferguson/>>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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Plessy v Ferguson

Posted on 03/11/2016 by John Cairns

On 7 June 1892, Homer Adolph Plessy boarded a train of the East Louisiana Railway company, He had bought a first-class ticket, and had boarded a “whites-only” carriage. Plessy was an “octoroon”, that is of seven parts “white blood” and one part “black”. This meant that according to Louisiana Law he was black. He was descended from gens libres de couleur. He had accordingly breached an 1890 Louisiana statute requiring that blacks and whites sit in separate railway carriages, for which there had to be “separate but equal” provision. He was arrested at its station on the corner of Royal and Prest in New Orleans. The detective who arrested him had been hired to do so by the Comité des Citoyens, a campaigning body, which wished to challenge the validity of the law. The railway company also wanted to challenge the act because of its economic consequences for them.

So this was a case specially created to challenge the law segregating blacks and whites on trains. The case against the act was famously lost in Louisiana and the Supreme Court of the USA, thereby upholding legalized segregation, by 7 to 1.

Your blogger, currently in New Orleans, has been to see and photograph the historical marker where was once the station where Plessy was removed from the train.

As an “octoroon”, Plessy could “pass” as white. He had been active in social causes for some time. No image of Plessy survives; the original marker from his grave in the St Louis Cemetery no 1 in New Orleans is preserved in the Louisiana State Museum in the Cabildo in New Orleans.

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